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The Church of Stone-Foundations





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COVER PHOTO: A Naga village

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FOREWORD

THE FOLLOWING STORY was written by Howard and Harriet Houston, missionaries to the Naga tribes of Assam from 1947 to 1953. They are greatly beloved by these hill people and the Houstons, with their two children, were eager to return to Assam after their furlough in 1953-54. However, the Government of India refused to grant them an entrance visa.



In reply to the many who ask if the Naga churches can continue to grow without missionaries Mr. Houston said: "Naga churches were not built on the missionary but on Jesus Christ and so they will endure." The "missionary" or "missionary wife" mentioned in the tale are Mr. and Mrs. Houston. All of us are grateful to the authors for sharing their intimate knowledge of their Naga friends in such a way that our hearts, too, are warmed by the flame of Rikhyo's burning faith, the dedication of Mashio's life and the on-going service of Azao.

Being unable to return to the Naga Hills, in December, 1954, the Houstons sailed for their new field, the Philippines. They look forward to working with the churches of Antique Province, but cannot enter fully into the opportunities offered until they acquire a new language and become acquainted with the culture of the Philippine Islands. We are confident that the same spirit which made their service in the Naga Hills so significant will continue to bear fruit in the Philippines.

—KATHERINE L. READ
*Editorial and Publicity,
Home Department*

*New York, N.Y.
March 1, 1955*

The Church of Stone-Foundations

By HOWARD AND HARRIET HOUSTON

The Road to Longsa, "the Village of Stone-Foundations"

Rikhyo is the son of the head man of Longsa "The Village of Stone-Foundations."

The hamlet is situated on the India-Burma border of the Naga Hills of Assam. Originally, Longsa could be reached only by a mountain trail, over which walked barefoot Nagas, with heavy loads on their backs. When the British dominated India, the mountain trail was widened to a bridle-path, so that soldiers and officials could visit these primitive, isolated, mountain people. During World War II, when the Japanese invaded India, they would slip through the jungles and hide in Naga land. Consequently, the bridle-path was widened so that jeeps might climb even the highest range to hunt down the fugitives. At one spot in the road, tremendous rocks jut out so that jeeps, as they crawled past, often scraped fenders or tore canvas tops. Just near this spot, on the spur of the Wokha Mountains, Longsa village is located.

Longsa Village

The village of three hundred bamboo and thatch houses has no gardens and no flowers to beautify it. Pigs, cows and chickens, which roam freely up and down the one long, narrow village road, find only stones, gravel, wood or trash littering the ground. The houses crouch shoulder to shoulder in long rows, facing the central path. When the people are not away cultivating their fields they sit on the stones as they weave cloth, make baskets, or talk. Perhaps it is the influence of their ancient or animist religion, so filled with fear of the spirits, which makes their faces sullen. Certainly, dirty clothing and equally unwashed bodies do not add to their attractiveness. Signs of spirit worship on every hand proclaim Longsa a stronghold of animism. Standing upright, at either side of the main road, are hundreds of "genna," huge stones four to six feet

high, which are monuments to the evil spirits. It has taken fifteen to twenty men to drag each stone from the river bed, five miles away. From a mound in the center of the village rises a magnificent "mingetong" or "spirit-tree." In the old days, when these villagers indulged in head-hunting, the branches of this tree would be decorated with heads of enemies killed in warfare. But now, only bamboo baskets, stuffed with cotton, sway gently in the breeze and serve as reminders of the "glorious, dangerous days of yore." At the foot of the tree are bamboo mugs of beer, a few eggs, or a bag of rice—offerings to the spirits who inhabit the tree. So sacred is the "mingetong" that villagers resent its being photographed. The people of Longsa live in continual fear of the spirits. Men sacrifice chickens or animals, or offer produce from their fields to keep the spirits in good humor lest they maliciously send a bolt of lightning and destroy a home, or afflict some member of the village with fever or dysentery, or even take the life of one of their children. Through the village runs the "olan echi," the path of the dead, leading to a cave on the precipitous eastern face of Wokha Mountain. No living man has ever entered this cave, although it is clearly visible from the eastern slopes. Along the path travel the spirits of the departed who alone enter the cave. For this privilege and for

A Jeep Road in Assam



the right to enter the shadowy, unknown land of future existence a price is demanded. At the time of burial, in some spot away from the cave, a woman or girl must wear five bracelets on a single wrist, and a man or boy must wear six bracelets in the same way. This ensures admission into the future life. The bracelets may be of precious or semi-precious metal or of glass.

A Naga village is divided into sections, with roughly fifty houses in a "khel" or section. Each khel has its own "gaonbura" or headman, who proudly wears a bright red, wool blanket, a gift to him from the government. The headman is one of authority and importance, whose fields are worked by the men of his khel. He also gets a share of all meat that is butchered. Such a man is the father of handsome, strong, clever Rikhyo, the lad of the friendly heart. Rikhyo's father had great dreams for his son, hoping he might even become a government official some day. To this end, the headman decided his son must be sent to the government school at Wokha Station, four miles from the village. No girls, and very few boys were ever sent to school from Longsa. Few of the men were literate and none of the women could read. Longsa is a primitive village and had long resisted all outside contacts, including the preaching of the gospel.

The Hearts of Longsa

The hearts of the people of Longsa seem as hard as the stones on which their village is built. Evangelists were not welcome and anyone who was discovered discussing the Christian way with them was under suspicion. After passing through Longsa, immediately after the village had performed the solemn ceremony called "oyan-tsoa" which represents human sacrifice to increase fertility of the fields, cattle, and people, and after seeing some of the phases of the ceremony, the missionary understood the resistance of Longsa to Christianity. The day before the ceremony, young men had cut from the jungle a big log about 6 feet long, dragged it to the village gate, and with their long knives had carved from it the crude shape of a man. On the day of the ceremony all women remained indoors; for the worship of a woman had no significance

and, too, all the men had been drinking heavily of home-brewed rice-beer. The rites of the ceremony began as the priest gave the word and a dog was decapitated and a cock strangled. The cock was cut open and the entrails examined for omens; then it was fastened to the base of the log. Again, at a signal from the priest, all of the men threw mock spears at the log, shouting wildly as if they were in a battle. Then followed a chant in which all took part, a chant formerly used by warriors bringing home human heads from battle. The ceremony called forth only the worst in the men who were utterly callous to suffering. The missionary felt sick at heart as he saw a puppy lying at the men's feet, writhing in pain. It was tied so tightly to a strip of bamboo that it could not breathe. No one seemed to care!

Rikhyo Accepts Christ

When he went to school, Rikhyo discovered that the thatched church upon the hill played an important part in the life of the school boys at Wokha Station. All day on Sundays there were meetings in the church, and during the week prayer-meetings were held. On Saturdays the missionary's wife was there teaching a music-class, leading the choir, or advising the Christian Endeavor. It was in this church that Rikhyo first heard the story of Jesus—a story of love and of power which could banish fear. As Rikhyo pondered this story, he recognized the power of that love in the lives of his Christian teachers and in many of his classmates. He knew he, too, wanted such freedom from fear. After some special meetings conducted by the Naga Evangelist, Rikhyo was among the students who confessed Christ by his public baptism in the shallow, muddy pool at Wokha Station. It was the beginning of a new life for him and of something new for his village too. Not even the darkness of Longsa village could dim the flame that had been lit in his life.



A Naga Christian

Longsa's First Christian

It was no easy matter for Rikhyo to be the first Christian in his village. His father, the headman, was furious when his son came home one week-end to announce his new-found faith and his happiness in Christ. Said the father:

"No longer will I give you rice and clothes for school, and not one rupee for school books if you remain a Christian!"

"I am a Christian and nothing you do can change my mind," replied the lad.

The leading men of the village felt disgraced that one of their number had forsaken the worship of their forefathers. They ridiculed Rikhyo who was the only one to remain in the village on Sundays when all others went to their fields to work. "Ho! ho! ho! Rikhyo is a 'water-drinker' now! Because he does not drink our rice-beer, he has no strength to work in the fields."

Rikhyo longed to share his new found joy with some kindred soul, someone who would understand the Good News, someone who would not jeer at him. Then came the day when Manshio, who as a young man had left Longsa to become a soldier in the Indian army, returned to the village with his wife from the Angami tribe. Manshio had travelled in various parts of India and had seen many religions. Although on his return to Longsa, Manshio no longer believed in the empty ceremonies which his fellow villagers performed, he had no religion to take the place of earlier beliefs. Both he and his wife listened eagerly as Rikhyo told of his vital discovery. They could not hear enough and begged Rikhyo to tell them more and more. One Sunday, when Rikhyo felt Manshio and his wife were ready for public confession, the three of them went to Wokha Station. Evangelist Ahamo baptised the couple, and so Longsa had three resident Christians.

Manshio Adopts Rikhyo

Manshio owned an old army weapons-carrier, which he drove between Wokha and Kohima, a distance of about fifty miles. He bought Lotha cotton, chillies (hot peppers) and oranges which he

then took to sell in the larger markets. In turn he bought kerosene, salt, lifebuoy soap, thread and yard-cloth to take back to Longsa village where he maintained a little shop. Since Manshio had no children, he adopted Rikhyo (whose own father had refused to support him) as his son and helped him through school.

Rikhyo Wins Others

So contagious was his enthusiasm and so eager was Rikhyo to share the Good News that difficulties and persecutions spurred him on rather than discouraged him. It was a familiar sight on the mission compound to see Rikhyo, who had walked the six miles from Longsa village, escorting someone else he had won to Christ. Once it was Azao, a tall, slender lad who was studying in the government school. Another time it was a soldier home on leave. One Sunday a larger group of young women and boys came, escorted by Manshio and his wife, Azao, and Rikhyo. All had been won by Rikhyo and were ready to confess their faith in Christ by the rite of public baptism.

Sunday by Sunday this little group of a dozen or more Christians met for worship in Manshio's house. Rikhyo, although only a teenager, was their accepted leader. Rikhyo was the first to feel that the group needed someone more versed in Christian doctrine than was he, to be their pastor, so they chose Azao to go to the Mission Bible School to be trained. The next day Azao and Manshio appeared in Wokha and told the missionary of their desire for Azao to be trained as their pastor. They brought with them some eggs and a bag of rice but knew there would have to be further financial



Naga woman evangelist (left)
and two companions

assistance if their dream was to be fulfilled. No mission funds were available and normally each boy, aside from help given by his church, was expected to be self supporting. True, the mission furnished lodging, with hard, board-beds and a thatched cook-house where there were individual fireplaces for each student to use in the preparation of his own food. Since Longsa village had no organized church to help Azao and since Manshio was the only wage-earner among the village Christians, the post of school-janitor, which paid one dollar a month, was offered to Azao. He accepted with delight saying this wage would help him buy ink, soap, and kerosene. Manshio promised to provide rice.

Azao Attends Bible School

Azao, quiet but with a quick, winsome smile, took his place among the other young men in their late teens or early twenties, who had finished four or five years of school and were now being trained as pastors of village churches. Except for some primers, there were no other books in their language other than the New Testament and a song book. The New Testament was their only textbook and during the two year course they studied it, verse by verse.

The Church of Stone-Foundations built right next to the "Spirit-Tree"



The First Church in Longsa

During Azao's first year in the Bible School the number of Christians in his village continued to increase. When the group had reached twenty, it was decided they must have a church building of their own. Bamboos were cut, split, and woven into mats to form the walls. Thatch was gathered and tied to cover the roof. Rough planks placed on rocks were prepared for benches. When all was in readiness, with pounding hearts, the young people erected a tiny, primitive building, only fifteen feet square, and built in a single day. But to the builders it was beautiful and thrilling, for this was the first church in Longsa. It had been constructed while the rest of the villagers were away working in the fields.

At sundown, when the non-Christians returned from their fields, they were furious! "We will not have a Christian church in our village!", they shouted as they angrily slashed at the new church with their long-bladed knives. One of the headmen yelled, "You Christians cannot stay in our village! Get out! Go live in the jungle!"

It was a shocked and disheartened group of young Christians who met at Manshio's house that night. Sitting about the fire, they deliberated and prayed for guidance, long into the night. It was Rikhyo who refused to be discouraged and led them to formulate a definite plan of action. As they separated, each to return to his own house in the dark village, they wondered what the morrow would bring.

The next day, with Rikhyo and Manshio as leaders, the Christians went to the headmen and Rikhyo spoke out fearlessly: "If you are so anxious to have us go, we will leave the village, but you must help us establish a new site. It is only fair that since you are sending us away, you help us dig foundations for our new houses and help us clear out a spring."

The men, who had acted in anger the night before, were now not so eager to have this fine group of young people leave the village. Moreover, they did not relish the idea of extra work in digging foundations and clearing a spring, in addition to their regular work of the day. Grudgingly, they allowed the Christians to remain at



A Naga woman weaving
one of the tribal blankets

Longsa. Very soon another little church was built and stood as a reminder of the courage of the Christian group which refused to give up its new faith in the face of violent attack.

Azao Takes a Wife

A year and a half after Azao had entered the Bible School, the missionary and his wife received a small, handwritten invitation to Azao's wedding—the first Christian wedding in Longsa.

On the day of the wedding there were greater crowds outside the gaily decorated little church than there were within. All the Christians and their immediate guests were crowded into the building. The non-Christians, eager to see just how a Christian wedding ceremony compared with their own intricate customs, jostled each other to get near to a window or a door. Two wild banana trees had been planted on either side of the church entrance; marigolds and poinsettias were massed in every conceivable place; coloured paper, cut into varied designs, added gaiety to the otherwise somber building. Inside the building on the front bench, sat Azao and his bride, attended by the best man and the maid of honor. All four were members of the Christian group of Longsa.

Ahamo, the evangelist, preached a long sermon on the meaning of Christian marriage and the duties of husband and wife to each

other. Next, each missionary was called on to give some words of advice to the couple. Then the ceremony took place.

“Is there someone to guarantee the good character of the girl and say that she is worthy of Christian marriage?” asked Ahamo.

After a moment of silence and suspense, Manshio’s wife stood and said, “I testify that she is of good character and worthy of Christian marriage.”

“Is there someone here to guarantee the good character of this man and that he is worthy of Christian marriage?” asked Ahamo.

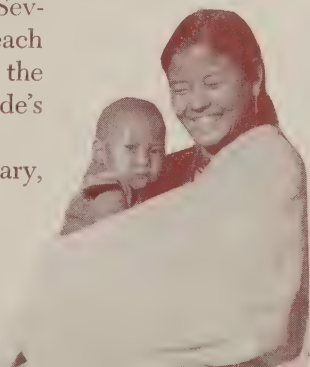
Without hesitation Manshio gave the needed assurances.

“Now let the bridegroom and the bride stand and join right hands,” directed Ahamo.

Children giggled, and women covered their faces with their shoulder cloths, while the bride flushed in embarrassment, for this was the first time Azao had touched his bride. The vows were read, the pledges made, and the couple pronounced man and wife, but without the use of wedding rings. Such rings would be beyond the means of Longsa village folk. As soon as the benediction had been pronounced, Azao crossed over to his male friends, while the bride hurriedly joined the women.

The bride’s parents, who were non-Christians, refused to attend the ceremony but were awaiting their daughter in their home nearby. The bride and her friends went into the house but soon reappeared carrying large, conical, cane baskets, balanced on their backs and held in place by a woven strap, worn across the forehead. In the baskets they carried the bride’s possessions: her hand-woven clothes made from cotton she had raised, spun, and dyed with jungle dyes; clay cooking-pots which her mother had made; bamboo cups, wooden dishes, and other household items. One basket was filled with rice. In another were coarse salt, a seer (two pounds) of brown sugar wrapped in a banana leaf, some dried chillies (pepper), ginger, and dried meat. Several of the girls carried smaller baskets in each of which was a chicken. The chickens and the rice were wedding presents from the bride’s parents.

A procession formed. Ahamo, the missionary,



Naga mother and child

and Azao accompanied by the men and the boys took the lead. They were followed by the missionary-wife, the bride, and her friends carrying the bride's trousseau and gifts in the conical baskets. All sang gospel songs as they walked to the other end of the village where Azao had built his new house, during his Christmas vacation. Dozens of excited village children ran back and forth past the procession. Non-Christians, their hostility melted by the occasion, waved smiling greetings. The bride and her attendants disappeared into the new house. Azao and his friends had prepared the wedding feast of Naga brown rice and fiery-hot,



Naga porters carrying live pigs to market

pork-curry. Outside of the house many men and boys of the village, both non-Christian and Christian, squatted on their haunches, waiting for the "feast." Disposable banana leaves were spread on the ground, and piled high with rice and curry. How fast the men ate, and with never a spoken word! That it was a good feast was evidenced by the audible chewing, smacking of lips, and the noisy sipping of sweet tea. Instead of a second helping, each guest was

given a generous portion, wrapped in a banana leaf, to be taken back to the stay-at-homes.

The missionaries and Ahamo were given special honor. For them a rickety table was set just outside of the house. Bowls of oranges and exceedingly sweet, warm, tea were served first. Next, Manshio's wife brought soft-boiled eggs. These posed a problem for the missionaries, since not even a spoon was provided. The question was soon answered as the missionaries watched Ahamo. He unconcernedly cracked his egg and poured its lukewarm contents into his mouth. The missionaries did the same and found themselves particularly grateful for the cup of tea which followed. Finally, the main course of rice and curry was served, but here the westerners had become adept in using fingers in place of knife and fork. The bride and her friends had eaten their feast inside the house but now came out to join the festive crowd. Just as the missionaries prepared to leave, Manshio addressed them saying: "This has been a very happy day in our village with its celebration of the first Christian marriage. We are honored that you came to our village. The bridegroom wishes to give you a present to show his happiness." With that, he held up a pig's head strung on a strip of bamboo and presented it to the amazed westerners! They accepted it with as much appreciation as they could muster.

Azao Returns to School

After a few days together, Azao and his wife agreed that he must return to the Bible School to complete his course. His wife, who wanted to do her share to help Longsa church get its own well-trained pastor, said it would be best for her to remain at home and cultivate their field. In this way, she could not only support herself but could also supply food for Azao in School. So, Azao went back to school at Wokha. It was only six miles from Longsa, and since Azao, like all Nagas, was an excellent hiker, his wife knew he would return to his home from time to time, as his studies allowed.

Several of the men in the Bible School were married, and their respective wives remained at home. One student, a pastor on a two year leave from the church had had to leave in his village his wife and five children. Attending Bible School for the Nagas



Naga boy, wearing thatch
raincoat, herding cows



A group of Nagas

means real consecration and often great sacrifice. Azao was no exception, although his home was only a few miles distant. The bride and groom were conscious that the eyes of Longsa village were upon them in a special way. Their home was the first Christian home where both bride and groom had come from Longsa.

About two months after the opening of the school term a boy hurried into the compound looking for Azao. He said: "Azao, come quickly! Your wife has a burning face and is very sick."

Azao rushed back to Longsa where he found his wife dying of pneumonia. There was neither doctor nor nurse in the village to whom he could turn for help. Azao's wife died, as had so many other Nagas, because there was no one with medical knowledge to help them. But Azao was different from the others in the village, who believed the spirits of their departed ones must follow the path of the dead to the cave. Azao, through his belief in Christ, knew his wife had passed from his sight to be eternally in the Heavenly Father's House. While there was sorrow for Azao, there

was no fear. He was strengthened and comforted by his faith and by the fellowship of those of like conviction. Nevertheless, it was a sorrowful band of young Christians who buried Azao's wife the next day. Hers had been the first Christian funeral. The whole church shared Azao's grief, but as they were drawn close in human fellowship, so, too, they were brought closer to the suffering Christ. He, once again, proved sufficient for their every need. Although the non-Christians of the village taunted the Christians by saying, "The spirits are angry because you have forsaken the religion of your elders! Already one of your group has been taken. Others will follow," the little fellowship stood firm in their faith. The non-Christians marvelled at the lack of fear among the Christians, and the peaceful assurance they had, even in the midst of death.

Azao Becomes a Pastor

Early in the summer of the same year, Azao graduated from Bible School and was installed as the first pastor of the growing Longsa church. By his life and ministry and through the witness of his fellow-believers the rock-hard prejudices of the elders of Longsa against Christ's way of life are gradually being overcome.

Later in the summer of the same year that Azao was installed, the missionary and a group of Bible School students passed through Longsa village on a preaching tour. As was their wont, the students sang gospel songs as they marched. One of the Longsa headmen rushed out of his house and angrily demanded, "Stop singing in my village!" Naturally the band stopped singing but let the headman see it was out of deference to his wishes and not because they were afraid. After an overnight visit to a neighboring village, the preaching students returned, heralding their approach with song. As they entered Longsa, the same old man came out of his house to stand in the doorway. Great was the astonishment of the members of the singing group, who noticed the old man, and discovered he was straining to catch the



Once a head-hunter but now
a Naga Christian Leader

words of the gospel song and not a word did he say to stop the singing.

Rikhyo, with his flaming enthusiasm, continues to warm and to win hearts in the village. Azao, the faithful pastor, tried by persecution and personal sorrow, still ministers to the little church and by his fine life and faith wins new members. Manshio and his wife, and each member of the Christian fellowship is leaving a definite impress upon the life of Longsa. In recent years, political events have brought the enforced withdrawal of Western missionaries from the Naga Hills. It is good to know that come what may, in the future, the church of Christ in the Village of Stone-Foundations will endure and grow. God Himself shall lead them.



Naga Christian Leaders at Wokha

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